

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S SECRETARY NICOLAY

Nicolay, Helen. *Lincoln's Secretary*. Longmans, Green and Co.  
New York. \$5.00.

Helen Nicolay's book written about her father is unpretentiously called *Lincoln's Secretary* but he was very much more than that humble title would imply. If Abraham Lincoln had a Boswell it was John G. Nicolay. The primary interest of his whole life after he became, at 28 years of age, the secretary of the newly nominated candidate for the Presidency, centered in the living Lincoln and in after years in recreating this same familiar figure for future generations.

Nicolay's apprenticeship as an admirer of Abraham Lincoln began when he was editor of the *Free Press* at Pittsfield, Illinois. It was here when he was 22 years old that he first met Lincoln in 1854. This Lincoln apprenticeship was accentuated by the removal of Nicolay to Springfield where he became a clerk in the office of O. M. Hatch, Secretary of State of Illinois. More closely was he drawn into the Lincoln orbit by publishing a pamphlet during the Lincoln-Douglas debates entitled *The Political Record of Stephen A. Douglas*.

Possibly Nicolay's first definite urge to become a Lincoln biographer occurred on his return from the Chicago Wigwam Convention in 1860 which had nominated Lincoln as the Presidential candidate for the Republican Party. He was very anxious to write the campaign biography of Lincoln. But this desire was sidetracked, for the moment, at least, by his appointment as the private secretary of the newly named nominee. It is doubtful, however, if Nicolay ever completely dismissed from his mind that first inclination to write Lincoln's biography, as he almost immediately began to gather notes looking forward some day to such a project. In fact throughout his whole life he had some unfinished manuscript, a new Lincoln publication, before him.

The last physical strength he was able to muster just before his death, which occurred on September 26, 1901, was expended to complete the closing pages of his one-volume abridgment of the ten volume history. However, there was one more book on Lincoln that apparently he was especially anxious to do, and he went so far as to prepare a list of subjects that might serve as caption heads. It was a discussion on "Lincoln forgeries and misquotations."

It is doubtful if the distribution of the volume by Miss Nicolay could have been more appropriately timed: following as it does two important titles which should be read collaterally with *Lincoln's Secretary*. The two-volume work by David Mearns on *The Lincoln Papers* and *Lincoln's Herndon* by David Donald will take on an added importance with the appearance of Helen Nicolay's work.

After reading the respective biographies of Herndon and Nicolay one is struck with the startling contrast in the characteristics, working habits, accomplishments and lasting contributions of these two men so closely associated with the President. It was Herndon who so severely criticized the work of Nicolay and Hay with statements such as the following:

"Nicolay and Hay have suppressed many facts—material facts of Lincoln's life, and among them are Lincoln's genealogy, paternity, the description of Nancy Hanks, old Tom Lincoln, the Ann Rutledge Story, Lincoln's religion, Lincoln's spells of morbidity, the facts of Lincoln's misery with Mary Todd, Lincoln's backdown on the night he and Mary were to be married, etc., etc. . . . They are writing the life of Lincoln under the surveillance of Bob Lincoln."

It is true that Robert Lincoln did scratch out of the manuscript "embracing the first forty years of his father's life" most of the material depending on the above mentioned Herndon folklore which Nicolay and Hay had gleaned from the Herndon traditions as used by Lamon. Herndon did not become Lincoln's law partner until Lincoln was thirty-five years old. This fact probably did not encourage Robert to place too much dependence on Herndon's limited knowledge about his father's early years. Time has proven the wisdom of Robert Lincoln's blue pencil expurgations.

The more important collateral reading may be done, however, in conjunction with the Mearns account of the recently acquired Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress. We understand that the John G. Nicolay manuscript collection will also find a place in the same institution, which will greatly enhance the value of what might be called the parent collection.

By April 1874 the Lincoln Papers which had remained undisturbed with Judge Davis at Bloomington were sent to Chicago and Robert opened one of the boxes, Nicolay immediately wrote Robert about the value of the papers in a long letter in which this paragraph appears:

"I am also especially anxious—and I press this point particularly—that not a scrap of paper of any kind be destroyed. The merest memorandum, mark, signature or figure, may have a future historical nature, which we cannot now arbitrarily determine, and the only good rule is to save everything."

By July 17, 1874, the Lincoln Papers had already been shipped to Washington in care of Mr. Nicolay as he had occasion to write to Robert on the above date that his father's papers were in Washington "still unopened and iron-bound, as we put them up in Chicago."

During the period that *The History* was in the process of development John Nicolay was invited in 1880 to write volume one of the series *Campaigns of the Civil War*. He felt this would give him an excellent opportunity to put his literary accomplishments to a test and coming as it did in the very midst of his larger task it offers an excellent opportunity to look in on his working habits at the very time the Lincoln History was being written.

He wrote to Mr. Burlingame, editor of *Scribner's*, with respect to his manuscript for the chapters in *Campaigns of the Civil War*: "I have taken every possible pains to secure historical accuracy." He also advised the editor that he had invited a searching preliminary criticism of his text, and named eight well informed critics to whom portions of his manuscript had been sent for careful reading before his manuscript was put into final form. He concluded his letter by stating he had solicited this critical aid "to avoid mistakes and attain reliable history." Are we to believe that Nicolay took less care in preparing the manuscript for the more important work? Miss Nicolay states in drawing a conclusion about her father's ability as a historian that one of the two most prominent tendencies was "an insistence on accuracy to the last detail." While we might expect in the conclusion of her book a rather complimentary note about her father's contribution to the Lincoln history, we cannot feel she is greatly exaggerating when she affirms:

"Not a statement in the entire work has been made from personal bias or without written evidence to sustain it, or as John Hay himself puts it 'we ought to write the history of those times like two everlasting angels who don't care a twang of their harps about one side or the other'." How closely they seemed to have hewed to this line depends largely on the critics' own personal bias.